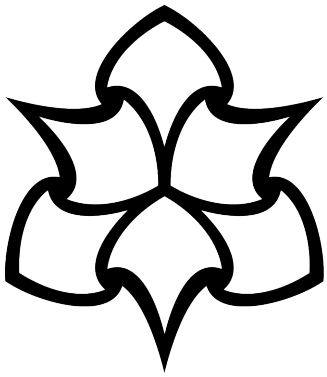

Mega-sized sporting events too often fail to deliver health legacy

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Prince Harry's Invictus Games is raising awareness of the achievements of injured armed forces personnel and the games have once again spurred conversations about the legacy of big sporting events – in this case how the event might benefit injured personnel in years to come. One leading consultancy firm has already pledged that the games will change the way they hire and include injured personnel in their business.

The potential for mega-events such as the World Cup and the Olympics to deliver benefits and messages is huge, and yet, despite the piles of money and the promises, all too often they fail on this promise.

The sporting world, and especially football, is in a commercially indulgent era of mega-events. But despite increasing talk of legacies and importantly, whether the money in matches the money out, some have argued that the 2012 Olympics Games didn't increase participation in sport. Perhaps the biggest miss of the World Cup in 2014 in Brazil was the absence of any aligned social welfare or health-promotion strategy.

It's a shame. With such investment, they have the potential to help tackle some big health issues linked to lifestyle-related diseases such as obesity and coronary heart disease. One good example was the European Championship in 2012. A study into its health legacyfound a number of impressive potential health outcomes in host countries Poland and Ukraine. It found health promotion, vaccination awareness and better emergency preparedness were achieved through increased partnership between the World Health Organisation, governments and hospitals. Yet many of us are still sceptical about the ability of mega-events to always do this.

Unhealthy profits matter more

On his HBO talkshow, comedian John Oliver lampooned the tactics of FIFA, football's governing body, for pressuring Brazil into lifting a ban on alcohol sales at stadiums during the World Cup – the so-called "Budweiser Bill", named after one of the major sponsors. In the British Medical Journal, journalist Jonathan Gornall criticised FIFA's so-called "festival of football", instead likening it to a festival of alcohol.

This shows the potential impact FIFA and mega-events can have in the way they influence major law and policy change in countries. Unfortunately, this example paid little attention to the health legacy of the event.

The fact is that health promotion is often neglected at mega-events. Despite the positive rhetoric around events like the World Cup, the story afterwards tends to be disappointing.

Wasn't always the case

Gone are the early days of the health promotion that featured on the players shirts, such as West Bromwich Albion's Health Education Council messages or encouraging safe sex at Millwall.

But let's not despair, there is a growing body of evidence that football – at least at grassroots and club level – can and is making a difference. This includes football helping communities and fans lose weight, as seen in the Scottish Premier League, football engaging with those who would be labelled "hard to reach" – like promoting better health engagement in older men as seen at Everton Football Club, and improving lifestyles in the English Premier League Men's Health programme to help prevent the onset of diseases such as obesity in later life.

Everton FC's tackles men's health. Everton Football Club

There have also been two recent academic special issues published, that were dedicated to the social role of football and the health outcomes of playing football, with the latter funded by FIFA. And platforms such as Responsiball and the European Health Stadia Network who offer case studies, reports and research with detailed examples of best practices across Europe and further afield. These examples offer FIFA with the evidence and guidance on what will work to improve health through football – though we have yet to see any of these lessons implemented or incorporated into mega-events.

No thanks to any legacy

None of these successes of these schemes come from the impact of mega-events and the often exaggerated claims around increasing participation. Instead, they come from the everyday brilliance of football staff, supporters and local communities. Many projects that achieve these health wins are managed by the social responsibility functions of the football clubs themselves, from premier league teams like Everton down to League Two teams such as Burton Albion FC.

There is no doubt that FIFA will continue to disappoint host countries, governments, politicians and the people that make up the football community. Audacious claims about "the power of football" from mega-events that don't materialise is sadly widespread. Perhaps FIFA can look more closer at its Football for Health 11 lessons – notably number four: "Avoid Drugs and Alcohol", to which FIFA has somehow managed to pay little attention.

While the majority of people who make up the audiences around the world forget about the broader health responsibility of FIFA – a multi-billion pound not-for-profit (yes, it operates as a non-profit) – because of the magic of Messi, Velencia, Neymar, Robben and Rodríguez, it's time for for more attention and change.

It's not a call to stop watching big events (unlikely to happen) but we can refuse to accept the status quo. As the commercial value of mega-events continues to grow, we must begin to challenge those involved in the organisation and delivery to get serious about health. We need to challenge them to use the evidence of what we know works to ensure their sporting mega-events live up to the spirit they so often claim.